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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the emergence of U.S. nursery schools. Sections concern: (1) the status of nursery schools in the United States before 1933; (2) the economic crisis of 1929; (3) the creation of federal programs; (4) authorization of emergency nursery schools; and (5) the involvement of the National Advisory Committee. Early childhood education had its largest growth during the depression years, when the federal government created and financed nursery schools. The emergency nursery schools came at a time when nursery education had been well-established and there was a strong interest in the education of the child before kindergarten. The emergency program represented the first federal recognition that the education and care of young children was a responsibility warranting the appropriation of public funds. Nursery schools were identified as an educational program, were located in public school buildings, and were controlled by the local public school system. Through the emergency program, nursery schools became widely recognized and demonstrated their value. It was hoped that the program could be incorporated into the public school system for the benefit of all children. The experience gained from the program provided a basis for further increase of nursery schools in World War II. (RH)

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THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT IN EARLY EDUCATION DURING THE DEPRESSION OF THE 1930's

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INTRODUCTION

During the twentieth century, the United States federal government has been involved in at least three national programs of early childhood education: The Emergency Nursery Schools (1933-1943); The Lanham Act Child Care Centers (1943-1946); and the Head Start Programs (1963-present).

This paper is an overview of the emergency nursery schools. This paper will examine the federal involvement in early education during 1933-1943 with the creation and maintenance of the emergency nursery schools, first by the Federal Emergency Relief Program (FERA) and later by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The examination of the nursery schools is useful for understanding the program in its historical context. The influence such a program has had in the expansion of nursery schools in the nation, the setting of standards for operations, teacher training, etc. The federal involvement in early education was temporary in nature. It was a response primarily to the economic crisis and its concomitant social and political results; but it also set up a mechanism for the continuation of the emergency nursery schools once the crisis was over, as nursery schools for all children.

THE STATUS OF NURSERY SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES PRIOR TO 1933

The nursery schools like the kindergartens before then came to the American shores from Europe. The nursery schools came from England, where they were developed as a result of the 1907 recommendations of the English Board of Education to create schools for children ages 2-5, and through the efforts of Grace Owen and Rachel and Margaret McMillan. The purpose of the English nursery schools was to provide a clean and safe place for the children where they could get nutritious food, have health inspections and

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planned activities for them to do. They were child saving institutions. Originally they were philanthropic in nature but in 1918 they became part of the public school system, with the enactment of the Fisher Educational Act and were subject to the Board of Education Regulations.

The growth of nursery schools in the United States started in the early 1920's was the outcome of scientific interest in early childhood education, of persons like Abigail A. Eliot and others who went to England, studied the "new school" and brought it back. Eliot started the Ruggles Street Nursery School and Training Center in 1922 in Boston. Presently is the Eliot-Pearson School at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts.

Preschool education as a necessary aspect of the broader educational program was of general interest in America in the 1920's. One such proponent was Gesell. The nursery schools had been primarily developed for educational experiment, for demonstration of educational methods, or for purposes of research and not exclusively for the relief of the working mothers or neglected children.

Attention to the physical care of children which can be traced throughout the history of the early education movement resulted in the habit clinics. During the first quarter of the twentieth century, there was a steady growth of interest in the health problems of the normal young child. The nursery school placed a great deal of emphasis on the establishment of appropriate health habits.

Growing interest in child study has been another factor which contributed to the development of the early education movement.

The establishment of nursery schools in the U. S. during the period 1919 to 1923 would seem inevitable. The development was rapid. One of the most outstanding characteristics of their growth has been the variety of avenues which have led to their development and the resulting different types. Nursery schools were established for psychological research, home economics education, educational methods and curricula, preschool clinics, professional careers for married women, philanthropy, and mothers' cooperative care of children are a few of them. Several of the pioneer nursery schools in this country came into being about this time.

About this time, 1922, the first nursery school to be used as a laboratory for the education of young girls in the care and education of young children, opened at the Merrill-Palmer School of Home Making in Detroit. Following the leadership of this school, other similar laboratories for child study and child care were opened in many home economics departments of land grant colleges. The first were at Iowa State University and at Cornell University.

The kindergarten-primary department of Teachers College, Columbia University was interested in the education of children below kindergarten age. They opened a nursery school in the Spring of 1921 with a teacher brought from England.

Cooperative nursery schools also appeared at this time. In 1915, a group of faculty wives at the University of Chicago organized a cooperative nursery school for the care of their young children.

COMMENTS

Nursery schools have many common objectives but somewhat varied purposes. Practically all aim to serve as a supplement to rather than as a substitute for the home.

The main objectives of the nursery schools of the 1920's were to provide opportunities for controlled research, to establish experimental laboratories for the study of educational methods, to furnish facilities for training preschool teachers, to provide for the cultural and general training of college women, to train teachers of home economics, to demonstrate best methods of child care and to allow parents to participate in the group care of children and to train junior and senior high school students.

By the end of 1929, the nursery schools had demonstrated their value and were well on their way to becoming part of the educational ladder.

The standards for good nursery education were established in many communities throughout the U. S., the training of nursery school teachers was on its way, and the numbers of children served had increased along with the numbers of nursery schools. In 1924, there were 28 nursery schools in 11 states, while in 1928, there were 85 nursery schools in 24 states and the District of Columbia.

THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

The great industrial depression of 1929 found the United States Government unprepared to meet a major relief problem.

On December 1, 1930, the unemployed were 6,956,000, and by the Spring of 1931 the unemployed had reached about 8,000,000 with 30,000,000 dependents.

The rising unemployment which follow this catastrophe, strained the usual plans for relief of the individual states who asked the federal government to step in and help them.

The federal government responded to the national unemployment crisis with a series of measures. One of such measures was the enactment of the Federal Emergency Relief Act of 1933, which created the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). This was the first act which provided for federal relief to the unemployed through the use of federal funds. The sum of $500,000,000 was provided to be spent cooperatively with the states for the relief of the massive unemployment. Half of this amount was to be available to the states on a matching basis of one to three and the other half was to form the fund to aid the states whose relief needs were so heavy that they were unable to meet the matching provision.

It was the first time in the history of the United States, that the federal government assumed the responsibility to alleviate wide spread unemployment. The federal government did not directly administer the relief in the localities. It was the responsibility of each state to set up the appropriate mechanism in each locality to do so. The federal government provided the funds. The states supervised the work of the local relief programs, while the federal government supervised, minimally, the work of the states. The relief program included the payment of light, gas, fuel and water bills, groceries, wages for work and cash.

Among the professional groups hit by the depression were the teachers. The U. S. Office of Education was concerned about the closing of rural schools throughout the country for lack of funds. The U. S. Commissioner of Education asked the FERA administrator to include the teachers in the Education Work Relief Program. The latter agreed, after consulting with the Nursery-Kindergarten-Primary-Education Specialist at

the U. S. Office of Education, who indicated that nursery schools would benefit both the children and the unemployed teachers.

It was decided that the nursery school program would be part of the Education Program and would conform to the general regulations already developed for the program.

It appears that some professionals saw a connection between the need for employment and the unfavorable effects of the depression on young children, and suggested that some program be set up. Others, who were interested in nursery education saw it as an opportunity to bring the benefits of nursery schools to more children and to further the nursery school movement.

FEDERAL PROGRAM CREATION

It must be pointed out that the emergency nursery schools, were not created by a legislative action of the Congress, as it is customarily done for such programs. They were created out of staff and administrative decisions.

The nursery schools started when Harry L. Hopkins, the Administrator of the FERA authorized work relief funds for them with the following announcement on October 1933,

> "It has been brought to my attention that young children of preschool age in the homes of needy and unemployed parents are suffering from the conditions existing in the homes incident to current economic and social difficulties. The educational and health programs of nursery schools can aid as nothing else in combatting the physical and mental handicaps being imposed upon these young children. All plans for organizing, locating, and supervising the nursery schools shall be subject to the approval of the local superintendents of public schools and of the local relief administrators. Completed plans should be sent to the State Superintendents of Public Instruction..... to obtain needed authority to proceed." (Hopkins, 1933, p. 155).

EMERGENCY NURSERY SCHOOLS

Emergency nursery schools were the sixth Emergency Education Program, authorized by the FERA and sponsored by the Office of Education in conjunction with local superintendents of public schools. (Literacy,

vocational, worker's, and adult education, and vocational rehabilitation were the other five.)

The emergency nursery schools were designed to serve two major purposes: 1. to provide employment for the qualified and needy teachers and other workers needed for the program; and 2. to serve the emergency needs of preschool children and their families. These purposes governed the program until FERA dissolved in May 1935. The WPA gradually took over the operation of the nursery schools until they closed in 1943.

The nursery schools were administered by the Education Division of FERA while their educational policies were set by the U. S. Office of Education. When WPA took them over, they continued to be sponsored by the State Departments of Education but the sponsorship at the federal level ceased.

After Hopkins' announcement, a memorandum of policies was sent to the State superintendents. The memorandum described the policies to be followed in planning and setting up emergency nursery schools. They were to be housed in buildings publicly owned and the program was under the control and supervision of the public school system. It was further stated that the nursery school program was to include the participation of parents.

> "This way it benefits the child from every point of view and parents are both relieved from the anxieties resulting fromthe worry of inadequate home provisions for their young children and are included in an educational program on an adult level which will raise their morale and that of the entire family and community." (Emergency Nursery School During the First Year, 1933-34, p. 9.)

Among ways nursery schools could be developed were the following:

a. as units for preschool children within elementary schools; b. as laboratories for courses in the care and education of preschool children in high schools, normal schools and colleges; as units in urban and rural areas of need such as mining, factory and mill districts. The need was so great that there were nursery schools on Indian reservations, in hospitals for convalescent children, on subsistence homesteads, and in camps of migrant crop pickers.

During 1933-1934, a total of 2,979 emergency nursery schools were established in 37 states, Washington, D.C. and the Virgin Islands with an

enrollment of 64,491 children. The numbers in the states ranged from one each in Mississippi and Wyoming to 535 in Ohio, with 64,491 children enrolled.

During the summer of 1934, a survey was made in each State. On the basis of the findings, some of the States closed certain units which did not meet the established criteria.

During 1934-1935, a total of 1,913 nursery schools were in operation in 47 States, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico. Delaware had no program. The numbers in the States ranged from 1 in Utah to 346 in Massachusetts, with a total of 72,404 children enrolled.

Children admitted to the nursery schools were between the ages of 2 and the local legal age for school entrance, which varied from State to State. This was essentially a nursery school program and the authorization could not be interpreted as an opportunity to restore any educational opportunities for young children which had been eliminated due to the present economic difficulties. The education and health program were under the supervision of the public school system, and the program of activities included adequate nutrition and activities for the mental and physical health of the children.

Many children from low income families were cared for in the nursery schools. The children were given a daily health inspection and any necessary medical services in addition to well balanced meals, play, and rest in an environment conducive to normal development. The nursery schools gave employment to unemployed teachers, nurses, nutritionists, clerical workers, cooks, and janitors. The nursery school program had the benefit of expert guidance from public educational agencies, which were seriously interested in developing this kind of educational work and in establishing in practice high standards of management and methods.

The eligibility of teachers and other workers needed for the emergency nursery schools was to be based on their qualifications for the work and on their need for employment. In order to avoid delays in establishing the nursery schools, the cooperation of professional organizations through committees should be worked out in determining need. In the interest of the children of the needy and unemployed, who were to be given service through the emergency nursery schools, the partially qualified professional workers

in need were given adequate training and supervision prior to working in the emergency nursery schools.

> "Everywhere the nursery schools demonstrated their value as an efficient and beneficial mode of child care and caused widespread hopes that nursery schools could be incorporated generally into the public school system for the benefit of all children." (Final Report on the WPA Program, 1946, p. 60.)

THE NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The National Association for Nursery Education (NANE) was having their biennial meeting in Toronto, Canada at the time of the authorization.

Hopkins' proposal for the program was presented to the membership along with a telegram from him asking them to sponsor it. The Specialist for Nursery-Kindergarten-Primary Education was the President of NANE.

All NANE activities were tabled so the membership could consider the proposal. There was much discussion of both the dangers and the possibilities of the project.

After a vote, it was decided that NANE should sponsor the program, and offered its cooperation and resources towards its success. Two other national organizations interested in nursery education were invited to participate - the Association for Childhood Education and the National Council for Parent Education - and formed the National Advisory Committee on Emergency Nursery Schools.

The Committee considered and recommended policies for the educational aspect of the project. It felt strongly, that in order to insure operation of a high standard professional program, supervision was absolutely necessary.

FERA had not budgeted funds for supervision for the first year. The Committee secured them from private sources.

The Committee prepared and published annual reports for 1933-1934 and 1934-1935; developed five bulletins dealing with the most important aspects of nursery education and its content.

The first bulletin described nursery education, its administration and staffing, and the program of physical and mental health and daily play activities. The second bulletin presented suggested details for housing and

equipment. The Committee also prepared a training program for the preparation of partially qualified and needy teachers who may be employed in the nursey schools. It was sent through the State superintendents to those who customarily are preparing nursery school teachers. The development of the emergency nursery schools placed a lot of responsibility on those in the profession of early education and the members of the association and organizations interested in the education and welfare of young children. They in turn answered the call valiantly.

In order for the Emergency Nursery Schools to maintain as a high standard as possible additional provisions were made, before the opening of the second year, to employ a qualified supervisor of the emergency nursery schools within each state. Supervisors were appointed in forty-six states. These supervisors were trained and qualified in nursery education work. Prior to the opening of the nursery schools in the fall of 1934 three training institutions were held in Washington, D.C., Ames, Iowa, and Berkeley, California, for the state supervisors and other state officers of education who wanted to attend.

Nursery education being a new field, most public school administrators were not familiar with it.

The Committee developed policies for an educational program which could be continued when the emergency had ended. It served without cost to the government for travel or any other purpose, and had the same chairperson for its duration.

CONCLUSIONS

Early childhood education had its largest growth during the depression years, when the federal government created and financed nursery schools. The emergency nursery schools came at a time when nursery education had been well established and there was a high interest in the education of the child before kindergarten.

A testament to the strength of the nursery school movement at the time, the emergency program represented the first federal recognition that the education and care of young children was a responsibility warranting the appropriation of public funds. The nursery schools were identified as an

educational program, were located in public school buildings, and were under the control of the local public school system.

Through the emergency program, nursery schools became widely recognized and demonstrated their value. The program caused widespread hope that it could be incorporated into the public school system for the benefit of all children. The professional organization which sponsored the program maintained and extended the standards of nursery education.

The experience gained from the program provided a basis for further increase of nursery schools in World War II, when it expanded to include children of women working in the war industries and of men in the armed forces, whether or not they were from low income groups.

One gets the impression that the U. S. made a great effort to incorporate the nursery schools into the public school system as England had done earlier.

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